

Pastoral Discernment North Shore Consultation Questions

Three consultation sessions were held at St. Gerard Majella, Epping-Carlingford Parish.

To assist the discernment process the questions were revised and grouped as follows, with responses being recorded as a commentary on all sub elements.

Question 1: Participation and Mission

- a. How does the reduced participation of others in mass attendance/ sacraments and parish participation at Epping-Carlingford parish affect your Catholic identity and your personal Catholic vocation?
- b. Can you think of any resourcing initiatives / areas of mission that the North Shore Deanery/Epping-Carlingford parish can consider to address the general decline in Catholic identification?

Responses:

- Participants acknowledged that wonderful friendships had been developed and sustained within the St. Gerard's community.
- Mass participation across the period from 2016 to 2024 remained stable with some growth occurring despite a downturn during Covid.
- Strong volunteer spirit which is around 20% of Mass attendance.
- The sexual abuse scandals sometimes adversely affected the willingness of individuals to discuss and promote the Catholic faith.
- There was discussion about the ways in which various compliance requirements such as working with children checks impacted upon participation in various aspects of parish life from ministries to charitable works.
- With Catholics facing increasing challenges to their distinctive identity and beliefs it is necessary to help parishioners grow in their faith.
- Several initiatives could be considered to enhance spiritual formation and engagement with parishioners and the local community. One parishioner summed up this objective with the words "*Becoming a disciple and learner, an enriched being leads to an enriched doing*".
- Parents attending such activities as Lenten reflection groups often expressed sadness that their children were not participating in Mass, the sacramental life of the Church and programs around spiritual formation. Many were experiencing this situation.

Recommendations included:

- Actions, courses, and programs focused on faith formation:
 - Understanding the sacrament of Baptism and its importance as a first step in sacramental life.
 - Encouraging a vibrant prayer life around special occasions and acknowledging devotions and charisms e.g., Divine Mercy etc.
 - Looking at widening the availability of devotional items in support of such activities.

- Promoting Catholic identity through such events as a procession of the Blessed Sacrament
 - Marriage preparation
 - Periodic parish retreats, including family retreats (with childcare arrangements for parents who wish to attend), retirees etc.
 - Guest speakers on key faith-based topics
 - Promoting online faith resources (e.g., Dr Tim Gray 10-minute reflections)
 - Developing a faith mentoring/spiritual guidance process – providing individual support to help guide and grow deeper understanding of the faith and cope with challenges.
 - Children’s liturgy (seen as a positive offering) encouraging families to encourage friends to participate.
 - Faith groups for various stages in life e.g., family faith programs, singles, separated, widowed etc.
 - Further engagement with parents during and after completion of their children’s sacramental program.
 - Invite people to faith formation programs rather than into the Church (e.g., RCIA etc.)
 - Develop a program/strategy to encourage the return of lapsed Catholics.
- Install an electronic sign outside St. Gerard’s promoting the parish. Convey a welcoming and vibrant spiritual and community life. Invite people to return to the Church by posting interesting messages and events.
 - Consider the use of online community information/network platforms and social media to promote our parish community and extend a welcome message.
 - Consideration should be given to leadership training for various ministries and groups.
 - Other recommended initiatives focused on social activities which contribute to a sense of community such as:
 - Bingo
 - Footy club
 - Young mother group, sewing, knitting etc.
 - Exercise classes.
 - Events for retirees
 - International Food Fair (see recommendation under Question 3 relating to migrant communities)

Question 2: Collaboration and Evangelization

- a. Are you aware of any beneficial/ positive pastoral collaborations in the North Shore Deanery or with other parishes?
- b. Do you have any thoughts about how parish communities within the Deanery may collaborate more effectively and what goals might be considered/ achievable through this collaboration?

- c. What are your thoughts about how the current organisation of parishes/ communities in the North Shore Deanery support or impede the Catholic mission, ministry, worship, liturgy, and teaching?
- d. What are your ideas about how Catholic communities in the North Shore Deanery can be enhanced and strengthened?
- e. How can we foster greater collaboration between the Epping and Carlingford congregations within our own parish community?

Responses:

- Communicate any initiatives or programs offered by other Parishes and the Diocese.
- Parishes should learn from each other e.g., Chatswood “Parish In Council”. (NB: Several participants in the consultation sessions supported on-going discussion opportunities for parishioners around key topics).
- Need to recognize that while Epping-Carlingford is one parish, the two communities have their distinct geographical characteristics e.g., congregations, facilities, schools, transport routes etc.
- Look for synergies around shared challenges, opportunities, and activities between the communities wherever possible, including use of the new Parish facilities at Epping e.g. youth/young adults, migrant groups, families etc.
- The new facilities may also be a suitable venue for occasionally hosting wider Deanery or Diocesan events, given its proximity to a transport hub.
- Participants in two sessions raised ecumenical collaboration and networking with other Christian denominations in the area.

Question 3: Pastoral and Socio/economic Actions

- a. What are the most important issues concerning people in the North Shore Deanery area, and for our Epping-Carlingford parish community?
- b. What are some ways that parish communities and our parish may be able to respond to and address these issues?

Many individuals and families are facing financial pressures.

- c. How might the pastoral mission of Epping-Carlingford parish/ the North Shore Deanery be targeted to address the difficulties experienced by local community members due to high living costs and housing distress?
- d. What pastoral initiatives can be implemented to support individuals and families who are experiencing financial hardship?
- e. What areas of outreach or specific action will be helpful to consider in this context?

Responses:

- The demographics of the parish have changed over time. The population of new Australians has increased.
- Real estate and properties in Epping-Carlingford are expensive.
- The practicing Catholic population is ageing.
- Urban density in some areas is increasing.
- Parking availability at Epping can be challenging.
- Epping is located at a transport hub. Light rail will connect Carlingford and Parramatta.
- Access to facilities such as schools is good.
- Epping-Carlingford remains an attractive area.
- Strong sense of connection and community continues to be a characteristic of the Epping and Carlingford communities.

Recommendations included:

- Encouraging participation and integration of migrant communities through such activities as:
 - Events which reflect diversity of cultures such as food fairs and international days.
 - Offering English coaching classes or occasions that offer new Australians to practice their language skills.
 - Recognizing the devotional charisms which migrant groups bring and incorporating these into the life of the parish (and providing the broader parish community opportunities and invitations to be involved).
- Promoting charitable activities throughout the year such as Foodbank (food donations) etc. This enriches the spiritual life through involvement in the “corporal works of mercy.”
- As a parish, sponsoring or financially supporting charitable activities and the disadvantaged from available funds.
- Street walks in the neighborhood to identify potential areas of need.
- Volunteer partnerships with Catholic organizations could be explored.
